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SUBJECT MIAs

TED KOPPEL: Four American relatives of MIAs arrived today in Thailand after two weeks in Laos and Vietnam searching for information. We'll talk with two of them tonight. We'll have a report on their trip from ABC's Ron Miller, who went in with them. And we'll also talk about the prospects for finding some missing Americans alive with Vietnam's Foreign Minister and with an official of the U.S. National Security Council.

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KOPPEL: Once again, just a tantalizing hint or two that more information is still available on American servicemen who've been missing in action for nine or more years in Southeast Asia. Those hints passed on to relatives of some of those servicemen, relatives who have just come out after two weeks in Laos and Vietnam. They're in Thailand tonight. We'll be talking with them shortly.

But the Vietnamese, in particular, are suggesting that there's a price tag attached to any real cooperation on their part. Five hundred and fifty, or more, of the 2500 Americans who are still missing in Southeast Asia, 550 of them disappeared in Laos. And that's where our story begins.

Here's ABC's Ron Miller, who was along on the entire trip.

RON MILLER: Up there, in the mountains of Northern Laos, American prisoners were held during the war in Indochina, and now Americans are inching across a rock ledge, looking for answers, anything, about the 2500 U.S. servicemen still missing in Southeast Asia.

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The four-member delegation from the National League of Families is led to this alien place by a former Communist Pathet Lao military commander and current government official, Colonel Kamla Kaopathan (?). It is believed he knows something of men like Air Force Colonel David Hurdleka (?), who was known to be a Pathet Lao prisoner, along with Colonel Charles Shelton, in Laos. U.S. intelligence believes the pair were held in caves which unfold chamber-by-chamber in the region's limestone mountains. And Kamla believes he does remember the name, at least, of Shelton.

The delegation looks for any sign an American captive might have made on the cave walls, but finds nothing.

Kamla then leads the Americans to a nearby area, where he says two U.S. servicemen were buried.

MAN: The story, as it's told to us, is that they both died from sickness. They could not eat -- in 1968. And they were buried here. And they were buried here, both of them were buried here, and then a bomb just happened to hit their gravesites here and destroyed it.

MILLER: The group is unconvinced, their uncertainty fueled by inconsistencies from the Laos. While Kamla insists there are no records available on the 566 men missing in Laos, when pressed on another missing man, civilian Eugene Debruin (?), the colonel refers to notes he is carrying.

MAN: He was killed during the fighting.

MILLER: Kamla insists that while Debruin is dead, there is no record of where he is buried. But George Brooks, whose son's remains were recently returned from Southeast Asia, and Earl Hopper, whose son is still missing want more.

MAN: The [unintelligible] who took care of that has already died by the bomb.

MAN: Yes, but they did not carry the records on their body. They must have had them in an office someplace. Where are the records today?

MAN: We, as the family members, want to bring the remains of those men back to their homes.

MILLER: The trip is full of inconsistencies. Example: The American delegation is flown over Communist Laos, at a cost of \$1200 an hour, in a Russian helicopter piloted by a crew trained in the United States. Below, much of the terrain is scarred by bomb craters from the war, but there are still

undetonated bombs exploding in Laos, the Americans are told, killing civilian peasants.

The trip by the National League of Families is unprecedented. And along with the inconsistencies and frustrations, there are breakthroughs.

Ann Hart, whose husband is missing in Laos, and Ann Griffiths, the Executive Director of the League, whose brother is also missing, are taken along with the others to places where they are told no other American has ever been. They are taken to the site of a 1968 military aircraft crash which Colonel Kamla says he witnessed.

MAN: He said that he saw with his eyes the bodies burning in the plane.

MAN: He burned in the plane? Where are his remains now?

MILLER: The Americans search through the debris, looking for any serial number that might provide answers about a downed aircraft and its missing pilot.

Translation appeared deficient through the League's visit to Laos and may have contributed to an apparent conflict on the most riveting question there: Could Americans still be held captive in Laos?

WOMAN: Colonel Kamla, in the case of Laos, did say that it was certainly possible that in remote areas there may be Americans still held, which would be unknown to the central authorities in Vientiane.

MILLER: Is there any possibility that there are live prisoners?

MAN: Personally, I think that that's very impossible for that.

MILLER: Because Laos is one of the poorest countries in the world, the League representatives offered the Laotians the technical or logistical support needed for recovering the remains of missing Americans. As a further inducement to cooperation, the Laos were asked about needed humanitarian aid. The response was detailed and included educational, medical, and agricultural projects throughout the country that by one estimate would cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

It was clear the Laos are linking future cooperation on the MIA issue to American aid dollars.

WOMAN: Implementation of such a proposal would be quite a long-term process. And Colonel Kamla did not in any way specify the level of cooperation which would be given by his government to account for missing Americans.

MILLER: Still, the Americans were encouraged by this opening of communication and apparent better relations in Laos, which has looked with disfavor toward the United States since 1975.

The League members were not so encouraged by their visit to Hanoi, where it became clear to the American delegation that major breakthroughs on the MIA issue here depend on major changes in the official policies of Washington.

MAN: If the American government change their attitude toward us, if it creates favorable conditions for [unintelligible].

MILLER: But there were hopeful for the Americans, such as an unrestricted visit to the Vietnamese war museum, significant because it had been reported that the military identification cards of two MIAs were on display here. The delegation seemed to copy the serial numbers from everything American-made on exhibit at the museum. That information, along with serial numbers transcribed at a Hanoi junkyard for American airplane debris, will be turned over to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency.

But with it all, the delegation was not heartened by its eight days in Hanoi.

So, the Laos and Vietnamese have set their price for cooperation on the MIA issue, and no one in the National League of Families delegation thinks that price will be easily met. It's unlikely that the State Department will drop its hard line on Vietnam, as Hanoi demands. And Congress would have to change legislation preventing aid to Laos before that country received its first dollar toward rebuilding.

The National League of Families delegation came to Southeast Asia hoping to win some cooperation on the MIA issue. It returns home with that same task in Washington.

KOPPEL: In a moment we'll be talking with two members of the delegation that visited Laos and Vietnam.

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KOPPEL: Joining us now via satellite from Bangkok, Thailand are two members of the MIA mission that just came out of

Laos and Vietnam. George Brooks is Chairman of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, whose son was listed as missing in action in Laos until his body was recovered just this year. And Ann Griffiths, Executive Director of the same organization, whose brother is missing in Vietnam.

Ann Griffiths, what do you know now that you didn't know two weeks ago?

ANN GRIFFITHS: Well, it depends on whether you're talking personally or overall. I feel that it has been extremely beneficial to have met with the people in both Vietnam and Laos who have direct responsibility for this issue. I think there has been a willingness demonstrated on the part of the Laos to cooperate with the United States, as evidenced by the fact that they did take us to crash sites for the first time ever, including a U.S. Government representative. I think those are major changes in the direction that they were taking prior to this time

KOPPEL: All right. So we have a positive change in direction, then. But what I'm trying to get to is, have you learned anything that you didn't know before you went into Laos or Vietnam?

GRIFFITHS: Oh, yeah, a great deal. Learned -- if you mean about MIA cases in particular, we got some information, unconfirmed as yet, visited the Pak Say (?) crash site and did see fragments of an aircraft, obviously, which exploded; were able to recover two very small pieces of what appeared to be human skeletal fragments. That's unconfirmed also. And did this at cave locations which are those that supposedly held two American POWs.

KOPPEL: George Brooks, do you have any reason to believe now that either in Laos or in Vietnam there may still be some MIAs who are alive?

GEORGE BROOKS: We have received a great deal of information over a long period of time that seems to be quite substantial. And I have seen no reason for me to change my mind on my belief that there are men being held in both Vietnam and Laos.

KOPPEL: All right. Let me split the question off a little bit, then. Forget about what you knew before you went in. Did you learn anything during this trip that now causes you to believe more strongly or less strongly than before that some may still be alive?

BROOKS: No, there was no change in that. Of course, both -- the representatives of both of those governments deny that there are any live men there. We have posed the question to them: Is there a possibility that live men could be held that you weren't aware of? And we're still pursuing that question with those two governments.

KOPPEL: Ms. Griffiths, we heard in Ron Miller's spot what seemed to be at last the acknowledgement by one of the Lao representatives that they couldn't be sure because there are several remote portions of Laos in which it is possible, the spokesman seemed to be conceding, that there might still be someone alive. They just didn't know, and they were going to put out feelers.

Interpret that for me, would you? What do you make of that?

GRIFFITHS: Well, just before we came on the air here, I did get word that the Lao representatives had heard that, and it is being carried inappropriately in some of the wire stories. There were some problems with translation and interpretation. It may have been due to factors such as that.

There certainly -- the Lao have said that they will go to remote provinces in seeking information on MIAs and on crash sites and gravesites. At the time, I feel that there may have been some misunderstanding in the interpretation. So we're a little unclear. But they did say they would go to the provinces and let them know that they were interested in obtaining any information on those who are missing and crash sites and gravesites.

KOPPEL: Let me ask you a very tough question. I don't know whether it's possible even for you to answer it. Do you think that either the Lao government or the Vietnamese government has information which it is simply retaining until such time as it extracts the maximum price from the United States? Or do you feel they've now given you everything they have?

BROOKS: Are you talking about live men or remains, Ted?

KOPPEL: I'm talking about any information they may have, George.

GRIFFITHS: Well, what they -- the two situations are totally separate. In Vietnam, as you know, there is substantiated information that they are withholding remains on Americans, over 400 of them. In Laos, I think that what we have seen there is that there certainly was no systematic collection of records and that there are great obstacles to overcome, not to

mention lack of communications and transportation, or the topography involved in the country itself.

I do not feel that there has been deliberate withholding of information, but certainly a lack of capability and cooperation, which we do feel is changing at this time.

KOPPEL: George, would you sum up the pluses and minuses of this trip for us?

BROOKS: We have many pluses. The fact that we have an excellent interpreter as far as the country of Vietnam is concerned, and some of the problem that we have in regard to Laos was because we were not allowed to bring in our own interpreter. We have to go over tapes of conversations and have them reviewed to get a more accurate reading of them.

Yes, there were -- there has to be a plus. Anytime when you're able to sit down with the other people and discuss this thing -- and we emphasized continually that we were representing the families of the men who are missing, that we were not there as representatives of the United States Government. We will take back their message to our government.

KOPPEL: And what is it -- what is your impression, however, of what the Vietnamese and the Lao want from the U.S. Government?

BROOKS: I don't know what all the things are going to be, Ted. There's no question but what there's going to be a price. There's a price for everything.

Again, the Vietnamese government had said previously that they had removed any linkage between the MIAs and any other subject. The politics of Southeast Asia are a lot more dense than I am able to handle, myself. Our organization does not want to get involved with that. We have worked for a long period of time. We have told these people that it is now ten years after the war. They have consistently said to us, "We want to put the war behind us." We feel the same way, that we want to get on with the accounting of these men, that the families have lived with ten years and more of this anguish. And we feel that a great deal of that could be settled by these two governments if they really are in a cooperative spirit with us.

KOPPEL: All right. George Brooks, Ann Griffiths, thank you both very much.

When we return we'll talk with Vietnam's Foreign Minister and with an official of President Reagan's National Security Council.

KOPPEL: Joining us now from New York is Nguyen Cao Thach (?), Foreign Minister of Vietnam, who is in the United States to attend the United Nations General Assembly meeting. And with us here in Washington, Richard Childress, who is the official on President Reagan's National Security Council staff with primary responsibility for dealing with the MIA issue.

Foreign Minister Thach, what is it that is necessary, what is it that Vietnam would like to see from the United States that would make it more helpful in terms of getting whatever information remains on American MIAs?

FOREIGN MINISTER NGUYEN CAO THACH: For the Vietnamese government the question of MIA is a humanitarian issue. We do not ask the United States Government to reciprocate. But, you know, this question must have the cooperation of the Vietnamese people, because in the remote area or in the jungle.

So, if the government of the United States continue its very hostile policy against my country, so it is very difficult for us to have the cooperation of the Vietnamese people.

KOPPEL: Fine. Let me rephrase the question, then. What action on the part of the U.S. Government do you think would convince the people in the remote portions of your country to be more cooperative?

MINISTER THACH: We think that we have had a war between our two countries. Now we would like to have this, the war, it is the past. Now we must look into the future. We would like to have a more cooperative attitude from the United States Government. Then we can continue to have cooperation from the Vietnamese people.

And on the side of the government of Vietnam, we continue our efforts. We try our best for the search of information. And up till now, we have done our best and we have supplied to the United States Government information, and even we have hand over the remnants of the MIA without request of return.

KOPPEL: Mr. Childress, what in fact do you know of the whereabouts, or even the reality of any remains of MIAs in Vietnam? And is what you've just heard from Foreign Minister Thach, does that conform with your understanding?

RICHARD CHILDRESS: Well, Ted, we have credible intelligence that tells us that the Vietnamese are in fact holding up to probably 400 remains. We believe that that area, by itself, represents one where the Vietnamese can demonstrate unilaterally their good faith, their previous commitments to us that they view this as a humanitarian issue unrelated to larger

policy questions or reciprocity. We would like to see some movement on that. It's been many years. We've got a lot of American families that have suffered through a lot of uncertainty. And this Administration is committed to get an accounting. The President has made it one of the highest national priorities, and that predated his election, and that commitment carries on unabated into his Administration.

KOPPEL: Can you tell us what U.S. policy toward Vietnam is at the moment? Is there any possibility that there will be a warming of relations between the two governments, Hanoi and Washington?

CHILDRESS: Ted, our discussion tonight is limited, as far as I'm concerned, to the POW/MIA issue, which has been defined between the two governments and agreed upon by Vietnam, that it is strictly a humanitarian issue. Therefore I don't wish to link it at all with policy questions.

KOPPEL: All right. So when you say you don't want to link it, Mr. Childress, I just want to make sure I understand. That is the official policy of the U.S. Government: The two issues have nothing to do with one another.

CHILDRESS: Well, it's not only our position, but the Vietnamese on numerous occasions have agreed that it's their position. It's a fundamental humanitarian issue that strikes at the very heart of the American family.

KOPPEL: But you also heard what Foreign Minister Thach said, and he seemed to be suggesting, in subtle terms, that there are other people all over Vietnam who might be more cooperative if only relations between the United States and Hanoi were to improve. That sounds to me like a little bit of linkage.

CHILDRESS: I'd like to reiterate where I started. We believe there are some unilateral actions that Vietnam can take without regard to searches in remote areas and those types of things. In addition, in our discussions with the Vietnamese -- the [unintelligible] mission to Hanoi, for example -- we tabled several proposals for the Vietnamese which we would like to see a positive response on, also.

KOPPEL: Foreign Minister Thach, it seems like a relatively simple question, but I know nothing is simple. Why, if your government still holds the remains of 400 Americans, can that issue not be resolved? You say it's a humanitarian issue, has nothing to do with anything else.

MINISTER THACH: And you know that I have told you that we have not asked to reciprocate. So what -- I mean why holding

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these remains? To what purpose? We have handed over to the American government and people many without asking to reciprocate.

And if you have any indications that there are remains somewhere, you can give us the information. Then we will be able to find out.

KOPPEL: Mr. Childress, has that information been passed over to the Vietnamese government?

CHILDRESS: The Vietnamese government's aware of where we got that information. That's correct.

KOPPEL: Because Mr. Thach seems to be acting as though he knows nothing about it.

MINISTER THACH: As you know, even the delegation, the present delegation in Vietnam in Laos, they have visited the places where there is speculation that there are remains. Many times the press men and other delegation had to come to see there is nothing. There is not any sign that there is remains, because it is on our services bureau, not stories, you know.

KOPPEL: Foreign Minister Thach, I don't know what Mr. Childress is referring to, but I do know that there was an unidentified Vietnamese who used to work, I believe, as an undertaker in Hanoi who testified before a congressional committee here that he had personally seen the remains of many American servicemen. Are you saying that's not true?

MINISTER THACH: It is not true. You see, if you believe on the people who have fled the country, they would like to give some present and to be appreciate and to have privilege, you know. So even these people, they have given some indication, and we have shown it to the American delegation, many delegation, to see it on the spot. They have seen nothing. And they have even reported in the press that it is wrong.

KOPPEL: Let me turn the questioning around for a moment, Foreign Minister Thach. What you are saying is, then, even if relations between the United States and Vietnam were to warm up a great deal, possibly even normalize at some point in the future, there is really nothing more you can do for the United States on the issue of missing-in-action. Would that be correct?

MINISTER THACH: No. It is not in this sense, you know. I say that now my people will -- I would like to have the cooperation of my people. So if the hostile policy of the United States against my people, for instance, it is in that normalization -- hostile, you know what it does mean. And if

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hostile, they say that why you are so -- you so care about these [unintelligible] remains. And our missing relative, parents, and so on, the Vietnamese, why you are not care about, you know?

KOPPEL: As you've heard, Mr. Childress does not want to discuss relations between the United States and Vietnam. But perhaps you would give us an idea of what you would like to see. What changes would you like to see in that relationship?

MINISTER THACH: I have told you that it is not the question of normalization, a question of aid and so on, you know? But, for instance, the slander, calumnies against my country. It is not [unintelligible].

KOPPEL: What slander are you talking about?

MINISTER THACH: For instance, playing China card against my country, you see.

KOPPEL: Well, it seems to me your country has a very close relationship with the Soviet Union. Your country has 180,000 troops in Cambodia, in Kampuchea. Perhaps it's simply the United States dealing with whomever it can deal with in Southeast Asia.

MINISTER THACH: Ah, you see, the Chinese has 600,000 soldiers in our border, and they threaten every time that they will invade my country again a second time, you know?

KOPPEL: What could the United States do about that?

MINISTER THACH: If the United States play China card against us, give support to the Chinese policy against us, it is not cooperative, you know.

KOPPEL: What inducement, what advantage is there for the United States in changing its relationship with Vietnam at all?

MINISTER THACH: I don't say that they must change their policy, but at least not so hostile against my country. So the people, they can understand our efforts to seek the information of MIA.

KOPPEL: Mr. Childress, let me get back for a moment into the issue of this trip that's just completed. Are you encouraged by the very reality of the trip? Are you encouraged by any of the information that you've heard that's come out? I assume you'll get a little more information when these folks come back.

CHILDRRESS: Yes, Ted. We were gratified to learn of the cooperation by the Lao government with the League. We hope that that is a signal of further government-to-government cooperation on the POW/MIA issue. As we are convinced that if we are going to have a full and complete accounting, it's going to have to eventually be in those channels.

We look forward to the development of this initiative. We -- in terms of the trip to Vietnam, we have not seen the same kind of response. Yet the United States has been, and always is, willing to, on a bilateral basis, to sit down with the Vietnamese or the Lao to try to resolve what we consider the most serious bilateral irritant in our relationship. The solving of this will, in fact, be the most positive thing that I can see either country doing.

KOPPEL: Let me just summarize quickly. You tell me what I'm wrong. What I'm hearing Foreign Minister Thach say is that if only there could be a lessening of hostility by Washington toward Hanoi, there might be some movement on the MIA issue. And I hear you say if there's movement on the MIA issue, then possibly there might be a softening of the bilateral relationship. Is that accurate.

CHILDRRESS: What I said was that the most important bilateral issue between our two countries is the POW/MIA issue.

KOPPEL: From the U.S. point of view.

CHILDRRESS: From the U.S. point of view. If, in fact, we got a complete accounting and cooperation from the Vietnamese government and a complete accounting in this area, it could not, in my opinion, do anything but help the atmospherics.

KOPPEL: Foreign Minister Thach, a final comment from you?

MINISTER THACH: You see, in any case, up till now, you know, even in the hostile policy -- during the hostile policy of United States, we continue our best to cooperate with the United States Government in the MIA issue. I can tell you that we accept the proposal of United States Government to meet four times a year between the two commission for investigation for seeking information of MIA problem.

I think there's [unintelligible] right away now. We can continue to have better cooperation

KOPPEL: Foreign Minister Thach, Mr. Childress, thank you both.